

SYMPOSIUM PROCEEDINGS

EXCERPT FROM *THE MINER'S CANARY: ENLISTING RACE, RESISTING POWER, TRANSFORMING DEMOCRACY**

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Race, for us, is like the miner's canary. Miners often carried a canary into the mine alongside them. The canary's more fragile respiratory system would cause it to collapse from noxious gases long before humans were affected, thus alerting the miners to danger. The canary's distress signaled that it was time to get out of the mine because the air was becoming too poisonous to breathe.

Those who are racially marginalized are like the miner's canary: their distress is the first sign of a danger that threatens us all. It is easy enough to think that when we sacrifice this canary, the only harm is to communities of color. Yet others ignore problems that converge around racial minorities at their own peril, for these problems are symptoms warning us that we are all at risk.

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For more information on *THE MINER'S CANARY*, see www.minerscanary.org.

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Achieving racial justice and ensuring a healthy democratic process are independently knotty problems; at points where the two problems intersect, they have seemed intractable. Yet we believe progress can be made. Our goal is to explore how racialized identities may be put to service to achieve social change through democratic renewal. We also seek to revive a cross-racial project of social change. Toward these ends, we link the metaphor of the canary with a conceptual project we call *political race*, and in so doing we propose a new, twenty-first century way of talking about this distinctly American challenge.

The metaphor of the miner's canary captures the association between those who are left out and social justice deficiencies in the larger community. The concept of political race captures the association between those raced black—and thus often left out—and a democratic social movement aimed at bringing about constructive change within the larger community. One might say that the canary is diagnostic, signaling the need for more systemic critique. Political race, on the other hand, is not only diagnostic; it is also aspirational and activist, signaling the need to rebuild a movement for social change informed by the canary's critique. Political race seeks to construct a new language to discuss race, in order to rebuild a progressive democratic movement led by people of color but joined by others. The political dimension of the political race project seeks to reconnect individual experiences to democratic faith, to social critique, and to meaningful action that improves the lives of the canary and the miners by ameliorating the air quality in the mines.

The miner's canary metaphor helps us understand why and how race continues to be salient. Racialized communities signal problems with the ways we have structured power and privilege. These pathologies are not located in the canary. Indeed, we reject the incrementalist approach that locates complex social and political problems in the individual. Such an approach would solve the problems of the mines by outfitting the canary with a tiny gas mask to withstand the toxic atmosphere.

Political race as a concept encompasses the view that race still matters because racialized communities provide the early warning signs of poison in the social atmosphere. And then it encourages us to do something different from what has been done in the past with that understanding. Political race tells us that we need to change the air in the mines. If you care to look, you can see the canary alerting us to both danger and promise. The project of political race challenges both those on the right who say race is not real as well as those on the left who say it is real but we cannot talk about it. Political race illustrates how the lived experience of race in America continues to serve an important function in the construction of individual selves as well as in the construction of social policy.

Political race is therefore a motivational project. Rebuilding a movement for change can happen only if we reclaim our democratic imagination. Because such a project requires faith in the unseen, we find an inspired comparison in the

literary movement known as *magical realism*. This movement also began as a project to liberate a democratic imagination. . . .

At its genesis, we referred to this concept as “political blackness.” Our effort to develop a terminology arose in reaction to the neoliberal and neoconservative attempts to reduce race to its biological and thus scientifically irrational and morally reprehensible origins—that is, to eliminate race as a meaningful or useful concept. But it was also a reaction to the civil rights advocates’ inadequate response, which tended to embrace race as skin color and thus to limit the radical political dynamism of the civil rights movement to persons “of color.” In the view of the neoconservatives, race is merely skin color and is thus meaningless and ignorable. In the view of the civil rights advocates, race is skin color plus a legacy of slavery and Jim Crow that is now realized through stigma, discrimination, or prejudice. But to those outside this subtle debate, it often appears that both sides see race primarily as being about skin color. They differ simply on whether such a definition of race is meaningless and thus should be abandoned or is meaningful and thus should be at least temporarily acknowledged. The word “political” in the term political blackness was an attempt to dislodge race from this color-of-one’s-skin terminology and to extend its social meaning from a moral calculus that assesses blame as a precondition for action to a political framework that cultivates and inspires action directly. It was also an attempt to dislodge race from simple identity politics; it was a reaction to the cultural or race nationalists for whom one’s personal identity constitutes one’s political project.

We sought a phrase that would name the association between race and power that is lost in the current debate. But in responding to inquiries about the meaning of political blackness, we found ourselves bombarded by boundary questions: Who is inside and who is outside the category? For example, one graduate student persisted in seeing political blackness as a membership category. “Is a black woman lesbian middle manager inside the political blackness idea?” she asked. We responded that the term covers three elements: it has a diagnostic function; it embraces an aspirational goal; and it hopes to jumpstart an activist project. We then insisted that it was up to each person to determine whether she was part of this project. Action and commitment, not predetermined descriptors, would be the guide. We were not gatekeepers.

Meanwhile, we also discovered that many black Americans were offended by the substitution of “political blackness” for “race” because, by opening up the category “black” to anyone who wished to enter, this semantic move discounted the material reality black Americans faced every day and misappropriated the cultural community they experienced. In our view, these were all substantial reasons to find another term. Thus we substituted the term *political race project*. This terminology is also subject to ambiguity, but it seemed to minimize these specific confusions and liabilities. And while we moved to the more inclusive nomenclature of political race, blackness—and the experience of black people—is nevertheless at the heart of our argument.

